

## II

### THE METHOD OF DISCONTINUITY IN RECENT ART AND LITERATURE

**N**EW and "advanced" art is proverbially difficult. The initiated worshipper of the latest cult takes pride in tasting austere joys, which baffle the attempts of the Philistine. Novelty is more easily achieved in form than in thought; and as art cannot thrive unless its appeal is refreshed at intervals, we are used to expect that revolutions in style will take place now and again. Fashions come and go, and reappear, in other things than hats and dresses. No wonder, then, that within each mode of artistic expressions, new generations should set their hearts on an avoidance of traditional form.

If we survey the whole field and course of a given civilization, the differences between the developments of the various arts will tend to vanish; and they will fall into fairly well defined periods, in each of which some one characteristic will assume a prominent value. Again, for some time, the culture of the world has grown more and more unified; and esthetic fashions at the present day are to a large extent international.

When considering the achievements of the last forty or fifty years in Europe and America, one of the features that strike our attention most is the parallel emergence, in all the arts, of a movement away from a need which, whether in the ascendant or not, was always felt and honored: the craving for some sort of continuity in form.

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Among the various periodical changes in the progress of art, that which most naturally takes place, because it answers a chronic desire of the human mind most easily, is the change from the simple to the complex. The forms that suited our fathers because they were just irregular enough to be pleasant, are apt to grow most flatly stale and over-symmetrical to us. Thus regularity of structure is the most relative of esthetic values; no other undergoes variation of quite the same magnitude. Now it is a fact at the present day, and has been for some time, that in its effort to renew itself, art has significantly laid stress on that particular element in the condition of regularity, which consists of an unbroken, continuous tenor of expression; the stress being a decidedly negative one. A discontinuous mode of presentment has been sought by an increasing number of artists; and the craving for discontinuity has very generally moved towards a climax, which in some arts may have been reached, whilst in others it may not have been yet.

Painting first showed a decided breaking from an ideal which seemed an inseparable part of its very aim and purpose. Well before the end of the nineteenth century impressionism had won a place for itself in all the leading countries; and its influence was soon felt on the technique of all painters. Color asserted its full rights at the expense of drawing; objects lost the complete, rounded outlines which were thought to be part and parcel of their identities; and the synthetic tone-impressions were produced by disconnected color stains. How "pointillism" evolved out of impressionism, is matter of common knowledge. Pictures got more and more discontinuous, and a line long enough to be measured became the unpardonable sin, until the reaction came, and "cubism" reasserted the virtues of line and pattern with a vengeance. But the cubists have failed to

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carry the art with them; and in so far as one can speak of a common standard of painting, it remains at the present day largely swayed by the methods of impressionism.

The turn of music came next. For centuries, each new genius had been hailed as a law-breaker, a dull-eared fierce barbarian, playing havoc with melody; until his bold departures from the traditional patterns grew familiar, and tradition began to cling to them. Mozart's discords had raised a storm, and so had Beethoven's; then Wagner came, who broke musical expression into units, and recomposed those units into the richest symphonic developments. After much grumbling, he was at last swallowed; and feeling sure that this time the limit had been reached, the man in the street settled down comfortably to a quiet enjoyment of the fashionable concerts. Little did he expect what was in store for him. The last generation has extended the bounds of tolerable discords beyond the dreams of thirty years ago; and melody, whilst it will unexpectedly revive here and there, is mostly, in its older sense, a thing of the past; it has, at least, ceased to organize itself at once upon the blank of the average listener's attention, into a pretty symmetrical pattern of sounds. The unity in diversity which musical beauty requires, shows us now a very marked predominance of diversity; and discontinuous schemes, as well as discontinuous sounds, are almost the rule.

A similar change may, to a large extent, be traced in sculpture, the decisive influence in recent developments being probably that of Rodin, as it was Debussy's in the field of music. The tangible shapes of human bodies are no longer limited by rounded finished outlines; everything is made subservient, not to the sense of touch, but to that of sight; and the solid impression of the eyes is suggested, not given ready-made, by a complex interworking of harsh,

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vigorous, incomplete contours. Lines are not done away with altogether; but they are decidedly discontinuous, as are surfaces. One might possibly follow up the analogy through architecture; and note the part played by a systematic violation of symmetry, as well as the rarity of uninterrupted outlines, both in ambitious monuments, and the more humble dwelling-houses. But this art is least governed by inner, psychological processes; material changes, practical inventions, social happenings, are the main forces in its evolution; and that evolution is broken into a confusing mass of secondary movements.

Literature allowed some of the other arts to get the start of it at first; but it then more than made up for lost time; and it is now second to none in the enthusiasm with which it has taken up the new tendency. Dealing with letters, we come to a field in which periods are perhaps more clearly defined, and more naturally connected with the general progress of thought. We thus find it easier to trace the advance of the fashion, and to bring it back to deep-lying causes in the psychological development of the times. It is possible to say that the last well-marked period through which European letters have been going, was a new romanticism, which gained the ascendancy between 1875 and 1890, and had not yet run its full course when the Great War broke out. The fortune of the discontinuous mode of writing is inseparable from that wave of romantic inspiration.

The romanticism of 1800-1830 had been a revolt against the conventional cut-and-dried classical patterns, in the manner as well as the matter. To the orthodox reviewer of 1816, Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* or Shelley's *Alastor* suffered from a feverish, morbid intensity of mood, which not only destroyed the fine balance and lucid aptness with-

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out which no poetry could be sane, but shattered the smooth tenor of elegant expression. Coleridge's poem seemed rough and jerky; Shelley's, invertebrate and sprawling. In those writers, and in their most eminent contemporaries, the architecture and continuity of thought and phrasing were obviously the worse for what was, to all appearances, the unbalanced enthusiasm of literary zealots. And yet, strange to say, it was well before the romantic age that a writer who was only in some respects a forerunner of it, had reached at one stroke what remained for a century the climax of discontinuity. Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* sought for humorous effects in nothing more persistently than in broken, disconnected, incomplete statements.

The Victorian Age in England, and the corresponding period in France, tied the knot of a well-knit style with a firmer hand. The stress was laid again on artistic finish; with the majority of writers, reason, science, objectivity, were the watchwords; and a solid frame of ideas, or a body of conscious esthetic scruples, made the work of art a constructed thing. An exception in his own time, a prophet and pourer of the vials of wrath, Carlyle stood out, with his fiery ardor and impatient, irregular speech, cut into twisted, disjointed fragments.

Victorian self-satisfaction had hardly begun to be shaken by the doubts, anxieties, curiosities, and dreams of the new romanticism, when literature started on the course which was to bring it to the extreme discontinuity of recent years. Meredith made his heroes think aloud, or thought for them; and their thought, like his own, was a series of flashes, with which a half-impressionist style made shift to keep up. In France, the symbolist school denounced the rhetoric and stiff majesty of the Parnasse; Verlaine brought poetry down to the poignant, spontaneous, loosely constructed language

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of a child; Mallarmé loaded it with subtle, mysterious symbols, and his syntax was no less original and difficult than his wording. Then the "décadents" came, and for a while obscurity was the rule in an esoteric literature, in which the connection between terms and thoughts was a matter of mood or fancy, instead of argument and logic. At the same time, the mould of the traditional French verse, which the romanticists had broadened without breaking it, was decidedly cast aside; and the "vers libre" poets tried to destroy an element of regularity in measure and cadence, which was essential to the perception of continuity in verse.

Meanwhile English letters were following suit, through the "yellow nineties", and after; they had their own impressionism, symbolism, decadentism. In prose as well as in poetry a greater freedom of expression answered to the outspokenness of the age. Yet, whilst using that freedom, the normal English writer respected the normal structure of the English sentence. With all its explosive, brusque vigor, Kipling's style had not only sinews but a backbone. It was with a few writers, and in tentative pieces, that expression tended to be merged into a series of jottings, the only unity of which was in their common power of suggestion. Indeed the literature of discontinuity was never popular; it only touched the fringes of refined, intellectual circles. But from the time when D. G. Rossetti wrote his last poems, and Meredith his latest novels and lyrics, there had been in English letters a distinct vein of expression, in which the complexity or searchingness of thought told on the accustomed texture of speech, and often made the regular sequence of words subservient to original effects. In France, for the last thirty years, this vein has been broader than in England, and the more remarkable for its contrast

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with the usual clarity and symmetry of the French language.

The last fifteen years have brought the tendency to a head. Whilst, on the one hand, the second romantic tide is at slack water or has begun to ebb, the principle of discontinuity in words, on the other hand, has been carried to unparalleled lengths. France has her classical reaction; England shows some symptoms of having hers; Georgian poetry has rather swung back to definiteness of mood and verse. Still, many eminent writers in France, some of them numbered among the classicists, and many less eminent, are more than ever relying on discontinuous presentment. The prose of Marcel Proust, amorphous and indefinite, endlessly winds its tortuous way through the intricacies of character. Some of the young novelists have adopted a style in which words are just impressionist color stains, and are dumped down on the page, without the slightest regard for syntax, in groups governed only by experience or affinity. The language of the Goncourts, of Claudel, or Francis Jaunnes, of Paul Fort, to mention widely different shades of freedom, was nothing to this. In England and America, several of the most original writers are rivalling the boldest discontinuity of the musicians or painters. In this school, Mr. Ezra Pound, Mrs. Virginia Woolf, hold distinguished ranks; but the Mr. Joyce of *Ulysses* should bear the bell. Moreover, it is easy to see that a good deal of the most up-to-date dramatic production, in all countries, is impelled along the same lines by the combined influences of Russian art, and of the moving pictures; and German "expressionism", in its confused wealth of tendencies, cherishes a fondness for the spontaneous, uncoördinated vision and language of the mind.

Those remarkably widespread and intense symptoms should be accounted for by something more than the per-

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sistent spirit of the neo-romantic age. That this spirit was responsible for the beginnings and early advance of the modern discontinuous craze, can hardly be doubted. No less efficiently about the end than at the beginning of the nineteenth century, romanticism had promoted a rebellion of the emotional being; it had denied the discipline of the intellect. Its energy was fed by an eruption of the subconscious; in a direct contact with the realities of the inner life lay its strength; upon that, and nothing else, it took its stand. No more natural consequence could ensue than the romantic eagerness for a concrete, a complete, an unadulterated expression of the self. Immediacy of presentment was an inevitable enemy to construction. The elementary, passionate elements of the soul gave birth to utterances that would tend to be disconnected and uneven, as is the rhythm of emotion itself.

It is one of the paradoxes of the present time, that with those desires, very different motives should combine, so as to produce the extreme attempts which the school of discontinuity have recently made. On top of the romantic wave, and carried onward by it, the "new psychology" has burst upon the world; and as it measures the climax of a phase of thought, it is probably the vanguard of the coming and inevitable reaction. In it the sense of intuitive values is turned into an instrument for intellectual, analytical knowledge; at the core of the new science lies the objective desire for truth. By its very nature, the latter movement is thus substantially opposed to the former. In spite of largely converging literary effects, this inner discrepancy should be emphasized. It sheds additional light on the fact, otherwise apparent enough, that whilst being the extreme offshoots of the romantic spirit, the recent discontinuous writers are the symptoms of a transition.



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The advance of psychology during the last thirty years has resulted in the spread of a totally different notion of the inner world. Psycho-analysis, with its insistence on the subconscious, repressions, and the ever-present action of sexuality, is only a secondary aspect of that advance. What chiefly matters is that to the disciples of James and Bergson, the system of intellectualized diagrams which used to be taken for an exact mapping out of the mind, was no longer tenable. From those philosophers the reading public gradually received a much more concrete impression of the strange, shifting, incalculable realities of the consciousness. The mechanism of the utilitarians, and the logic of the metaphysicians, gave place to a method of subtle, vivid perception and intuition. The unity and continuity of thought, which had been taken for granted, were thus found to be largely an illusion, worked out by the imperious needs of the human intellect. Whilst the stuff of consciousness was in a way homogeneous, and its elements influenced and interpenetrated one another, it could no longer be systematized and constructed easily from the outside. To all practical purposes, the new view of the mind was that of an extremely complex and discontinuous mass of ever original states, which somehow felt itself one, but at the same time felt itself whole in each of its numberless fragments, and was anything but simple to the eyes of the onlooker.

That revolutionized view of what remains the central subject to most writers, the mind of man, is the deeper origin of an increasingly fertile literary motive, psychological realism. This grew to be, with some artists, the strongest incentive to creation; and we need not seek anywhere else for the cause of the extreme lengths to which the method of discontinuity has been recently carried.

The truth of the soul, the whole truth, and nothing but

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the truth: such is the scientific ideal which has again possessed many novelists. Whether analytical or intuitive, their knowledge of the inner world must be given direct expressions. Form, with the diagrams, constructions, conventions that clung to it and were hardly separable from it, was a veil between the creative impulse and the reader's mind. So form, or stereotyped habits of expression, were to be entirely done away with. Renunciation to it in every mode—as order, symmetry, pattern, traditional style, or even syntax—became a desirable end in itself. To an esthetic conscience pitched in that key, a more direct revelation of the artist's mood does not only result in truer art; it produces, or should produce, a heightened pleasure.

Those motives have entered into some of the discontinuous effects sought by contemporary musicians and painters. But they have been chiefly active in that art which deals most fully and minutely, if not perhaps most directly, with the human mind as its object: literature. They underlie the superficially divergent aims of the masters of the new technique. To study this, the most appropriate example might be the typical case of Mr. Joyce.

Whatever judgment one may pass on *Ulysses*, that work deserves attention as an uncompromising attempt to dispense with the traditional methods of construction. It is obvious that the author does not want his book to be merely chaotic; and he is clearly at some pains to sink into the very substance of his material the elements and the means of a more subtle organization. Of his success in that particular endeavor, different views may be maintained. But there can be only one opinion as to the efficiency of his effort to write disconnectedly. We find at least no apparent coherence or transition between most of the various parts; the text is usually made up of mere jottings, which represent

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the spontaneous succession of images in the consciousness of the heroes; no material distinction is made between the silent, inner language of the mind to itself, and its spoken words to others; unchecked play is given to the laws of contiguity and resemblance, which govern our associations of ideas, and no other unity is sought than that of the actual course of our day-dreams; stripped to essentials, the average sentence bears no relation whatever to the habits of literary style and the grammatical rules of the formation or sequence of clauses; whilst punctuation, practically restricted to the most common signs in the body of the book, is completely absent from the last forty pages. Indeed, no more remarkable example could be quoted of the uses to which the new principle has been put by literature.

Having briefly followed the method of discontinuity through the traditional esthetic provinces, we come next to the recent popular art which seems to have sprung from that very method as its central root. What made the moving pictures possible was at first a practical invention, a technical progress. But the cinema palaces once opened, towards their tremendous success psychological causes meant most. They answered to the natural tastes of normal men and women, without the training and refinement of higher culture. They offered the realism of everyday life, the documentary picturesqueness of snapshot views; and they very soon were brought to offer scenes of easy humor, cheap drama and sentiment. On the other hand, whilst they gave a surfeit of images, they reduced the mental strain of the spectator to a minimum. The construction of the whole series or of each episode was of the simplest; transitions were unnecessary; and the understood connections needed to gather the plot were given ready-made on the screen. The enjoyment of the show

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required only a mood of passiveness; and to such moderate demands, the many were eager to respond. It is undeniable that no recent social development has more broadly influenced the common mind; nor more specifically encouraged the preference of the natural Adam for a type of fiction at least as loosely knit as current experience. The desire for a certain kind of objective truth, and the dislike for a certain constructive intellectual exertion, were satisfied at the same time. It cannot thus be doubted that the universal favor of the picture palaces has contributed some of its elements to the atmosphere in which the principle of literary discontinuity has been able to thrive; just as the optics of the cinema have been responsible for some of the most recent developments in dramatic technique.

Before we try to pass judgment on the claims of discontinuity in themselves, and in their results, it may not be amiss to point out that this principle is not in any way self-sufficient and final. It is a method, a means to an end; and that end is so entirely distinct, that it can be formulated in just the contrary terms. The object of the method is directly to create truth, indirectly pleasure; and that truth is a lesson in the continuity of things. The elaborate oppositions and differences created by the intellect, are ignored, evaded, weakened; the broken, interrupted mass of images, sensations, and elementary units of thought, merges into one tenor and one homogeneous sequence. Indiscrimination is the outcome of extreme and haphazard discrimination. The universe of Mr. Joyce is a pantheistic vision in which nature and the soul are one and equally indefinite. The spell of discontinuous art, in music, painting, the drama, and writings of all kinds, works upon us like a hallucination; the intelligence, always exacting and diffident, is set at rest; our senses and imaginations are drowned in the

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soft-whirling, rippling current of things. A trance seizes our minds and our wills. The audiences in picture palaces know that hypnotic effect well, and are very probably fond of it.

What, then, are the merits and can be the future of discontinuity? As put to practice in recent attempts, it has probably reached the limit that, with the utmost stretch of elasticity, a sane taste could be brought to accept. Even so, it has served a purpose, and been a very useful esthetic experiment. Taken as a whole, it has justified itself in its artistic consequences. It was, to begin with, an inevitable reaction; the constructive faculties had been indulged to an excess; philosophy, science, and art, were equally the better for a change which broke through the crust of schemes and concepts, to the living realities below. The discontinuous method is certainly truer to fact than was the naïvely continuous tradition of the past. The perception of this truth can be agreeable; and in so far as the reduction of complexity to unity is a pleasure, the new art is not only more complex and more fresh, but more efficient.

It must be confessed, however, that art cannot live without some sort of perceptible organization; and that all is not well when an organic unity is to be established by the reader, listener or spectator, at the cost of a very strenuous effort. Pleasurable feelings are apt to vanish under the strain; and some temperaments may bear it longer than others, but a time comes for all when the most heroic stubbornness must confess itself beaten. At that stage, we say that the work lacks order, architecture, balance, to the extent of losing the elusive virtue of beauty. Now, the latest expressions of the discontinuous principle, in all fields, have come dangerously close to that limit, or passed it. A reaction has begun in painting; it may not be far in music;

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whilst in literature, some symptoms are already betraying its approach. It is not perhaps unfair to Mr. Joyce to say that the hard-won and still disputed success of *Ulysses* will not so much open the way to new works of the same kind, as bring together the gathering forces of a revolt against the extremities of formlessness in art.

According to precedents, the present years of transition should lead us to a new age of rationality, equilibrium, and order—a classical age. A movement in that direction has grown to be the predominant influence in French letters; it is not improbable that on different lines, the literatures of other countries should show a parallel change. Though the cubists have not won the day, they are leaving a mark on painters; and in the conflict of pictorial tendencies, a synthesis is maturing which will no doubt reëstablish to some extent the rights of form. Music is feeling her way to some extremely broad elastic law, which should reconcile the absolute freedom of the artist with a modicum of harmony. The same is likely to be the characteristic feature of the synthetic period which after-war literature is to all appearances entering. Still, the constructive inspiration and style that reassert themselves will leave a wider margin for the discontinuous effects, which have finally found a place among the legitimate resources of art.